

By Ian Graham

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Military families face a brand of stress completely foreign to most Americans – it's said that when one puts on the uniform of a servicemember, their entire family wears the uniform as well.

Today Blue Star Families, an organization dedicated to lobbying lawmakers on behalf of servicemembers' families, unveiled the results of a survey they conducted to assess the biggest needs and concerns in the military community.

A panel of experts, including Blue Star Families Board Chairman Kathy Roth-Douquet; Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Doug Wilson; Sheila Casey, wife of Army Chief of Staff Gen. George Casey Jr.; Babette Maxwell, editor-in-chief of Military Spouse Magazine; and others, presented the survey's findings and gave a sort of "state of the military family" address.

Wilson said he's seen an increase in discussion of military family issues, but he cautioned the audience not to let it become idle water-cooler chatter. One percent of the population is defending the other 99 percent, he said, so it's the 99 percent's duty to make sure military families get the support and feeling of normalcy they need.

"These people, their children, they want to be a part of a community," he said. "They aren't victims, not special entities, but members of a community."

The survey itself pointed out some shifts in priorities among family members. The respondents, 2,970 family members associated with Blue Star Families, said that while pay and benefits is still their number one concern, it's lost some support (a three-point drop in percentage from 21 to 18), as has OPTEMPO, the third-highest rated concern (16 percent to 14 percent).

Employment and childrens' issues have made gains, on the other hand. Spouse employment jumped from 6 percent to 9 percent of respondents rating it their top concern, deployment's

effect on children raised from 12 to 15 percent, and children's education made a big leap, from three to 12 percent.

Though the panel didn't specifically discuss more severe issues like abuse, divorce or suicide, Casey said a lot of the statistics she's seen on military family issues are a stark indication of things to come. They're "lagging indicators," she said, of bigger problems the military will face.

"If we don't stay in front of these issues, we won't be able to support these families," she said. "It will be too late."

Action needs to come fast, she said. Senators Barbara Boxer of California, Richard Burr of North Carolina, and Representatives Glenn Nye of Virginia, Sanford Bishop, Jr. of Georgia and Cathy McMorris-Rodgers of Washington state agreed in their remarks to the audience that action needs to be taken.

Thanks to this survey, Boxer said, it's a much easier process. Supposition and assumption don't get good results, she added.

"In order to help, we need to know the facts," she said. "This survey has already made a big difference."

McMorris Rodgers said she's ready to better address issues of spousal employment, which has been a growing concern in the past two years.

Of the 61 percent who said they aren't employed outside of the home, 48 percent want to find a job. Forty-nine percent of those surveyed said they feel being a military spouse has a "negative impact" on their ability to pursue a career, 13 percent of them felt there was some discrimination against them because they're a military spouse.

But the survey was hardly an exercise in doom and gloom. It also showed that of those

surveyed, 68 percent were volunteers in their community – by contrast, the national average is slightly less than 27 percent. Fifty-five percent of respondents want to pursue more education through the My Career Advancement Accounts (MyCAA) program. More than half of those surveyed, representing all ranks, said they'd like help pursuing a degree.

“We’re resilient. We’re not victims,” Casey said.

Read the survey results, including full answers to open-ended questions regarding pay, education, and the stresses of deployment on the [Blue Star Families website](#) .